

Killing Time: All in a ball

Story text from <http://www.dvidshub.net/news/76067/killing-time-all-ball#.Tt9f5vLd6So>

Editor's Note: This is the first installment in a series on Marines and corpsmen from 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment, based out of Marine Corps Base Hawaii, Kaneohe Bay. They are preparing for war by training in the California desert. Miserable heat, grueling training and the absence of home's amenities here make their work exhausting and their down time precious. They labor with little and appreciate the simple. This is the grunt grind, the life of the Marine infantryman.

MARINE CORPS AIR GROUND COMBAT CENTER TWENTYNINE PALMS, Calif. — Amid a dusty city of tents, two Marines unwind after a long day of training. They leisurely toss a baseball back and forth, laughing and trading jabs as the evening sun dips under a colorful sky.

Though their pre-deployment training is exhausting, Lance Cpls. Cody Varnell and Nick Lacarra make time every night for throwing around the baseball. The simple activity is their refresher from the grind of grunt life.

"No matter how tired we are, we always have time for some relaxation and fun," the 20-year-old Lacarra, from Long Beach, Calif., said. "Baseball is our way to unwind."

By trade, they are machine gunners with Weapons Company, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment. They were tested by the cycle of patrolling and standing post on their last deployment to Afghanistan in 2010.

On their upcoming fall deployment to Helmand province, they'll be familiar with the scenery but face new challenges. Instead of solely mentoring new Marines, they'll work as military working dog handlers. Their purpose will be finding improvised explosive devices before the IEDs can reign destruction.

Both said working with the dogs is rewarding, but the job is still new and taxing. When the training is tough and they're hot and tired, the dogs are too.

These challenges will translate from California to Afghanistan once they complete the 35-day Enhanced Mojave Viper training exercise here. But regardless of what a day brings, they've got baseball — their brief escape from the day's stresses.

"When Lacarra and I throw around the ball, our day comes full-circle," Varnell, 20, from Mesquite, Texas, said. "We talk about the good, the bad and what we can improve on ... and then we do it all again."

They labor with little and appreciate the simple. This is the grunt grind, the life of the Marine infantryman.

Killing Time: A sanctuary of spades

Story text from <http://www.dvidshub.net/news/77032/killing-time-sanctuary-spades#.Tt9fqvLd6So>

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MARINE CORPS AIR GROUND COMBAT CENTER TWENTYNINE PALMS, Calif. — Dimly lit by the neon glow of chem lights, Lance Cpl. Jared Honeyman escapes from his day into a sanctuary of spades.

Seated in his tent on a box of meals, ready-to-eat, he draws a deck of cards from the cargo pocket of his utility trousers. He deals cards out to three friends seated around him, and in return, receives an equal number of sarcastic comments. A balmy desert heat permeates the air, ignoring the fact the sun has long since disappeared below the horizon.

Honeyman's days are long and often boring. He rotates through a tedious cycle of standing post, picking up trash and practicing infantry skills. Playing spades is his escape from the grind of grunt life.

"After training and working in the heat all day, it's a good mental break from the stress and monotony of being here," Honeyman said. "Everything we're doing has a purpose, but there is always down time. Sleeping gets old."

Though Honeyman sits among infantrymen, he isn't one. He's an administrative specialist-turned-grunt with 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment's Guard Force Platoon. Since he's a POG — the grunts' affectionate name for "personnel other than grunts" — there's a gap he needs to bridge. By opening conversation over spades, he steps into their personalities and family lives.

"Even if we only have a few minutes, we throw down a game, open up and break the ice ... that barrier," Honeyman said. "A simple card game builds a common bond and gives us a chance to compete. We're Marines; competition filters into everything we do."

Necessity didn't lead him here. At home in Tulsa, Okla., a short while ago, the 26-year-old was near completing a bachelor degree and managing his successful lawn maintenance business. But he knew money and book knowledge didn't equal life experience.

As he relaxes and festers in a filthy, sweat-starched uniform, he's experiencing life. Honeyman doesn't say it, but he knows he's somewhat crazy to have left what he had. He wanted a challenge, and in this moment, it's winning a card game and fighting to convince he's been wearing sunscreen. A toothy grin and leathery red face kill his argument.

In the desert, Honeyman's been humbled by filling sand bags and serving chow. These menial tasks have adjusted his perspective. They've helped him relate to the melting pot of Marines with which he lives and works.

"We've come from different walks of life, been thrown into this platoon and are expected to ace our mission," he said. "Simple things like playing cards help us build trust, so when crap hits the fan, you know the other Marines will be there for you — whether it's in our personal lives or on patrol."

The days leading up to his deployment to Afghanistan are long, but the weeks go fast ... and Honeyman's key to relaxation is only a cargo pocket away.

Killing Time: Fighting through the wringer

Story text from <http://www.dvidshub.net/news/80592/killing-time-fighting-through-wringer#.Tt9ffFLd6So>

Editor's Note: This is the third installment in a series on U.S. Marines and Navy corpsmen from 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment, based out of Marine Corps Base Hawaii, Kaneohe Bay. After laboring through training in the California desert, they are now supporting Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Grueling days and the absence of home's amenities here make their work exhausting and their down time precious. They labor with little and appreciate the simple. This is their deployment grind.

FORWARD OPERATING BASE DELHI, Helmand province, Afghanistan — Peering eerily through the scratched lenses of a menacing black and red mask, U.S. Navy Seaman Chris Mesnard's wild eyes rake his corner of the makeshift combat-zone gym here.

The corpsman toils through a twisted concoction of conditioning exercises, forcing sweat to seep through his olive drab United States Marine Corps hoodie. With each set, his friendly disposition dissipates into an uncomfortable cycle of labored breathing, courtesy of the oxygen-restricting training mask enveloping his face.

Around him, gym mates stare at his strange get-up, but Mesnard doesn't notice. His consciousness has since evaporated from the makeshift gym. Instead, he's focused on the self-described "cheesy" image of a sparkling Ultimate Fighting Championship title belt.

The 22-year-old corpsman from Omaha, Neb., and graduate of Bellevue East High School, is currently on his second deployment to Afghanistan with 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment.

On duty, Mesnard tends to sick and injured Marines at the battalion aid station, and helps a senior corpsman with administrative duties. In his down time, he trains to fight in mixed martial arts, breaking down his body to feed a four-year obsession with the sport.

"After winning my first fight in 2007, I knew I couldn't stop," Mesnard said, relishing memories of the 47-second victory. "I loved MMA before that, but at that moment, I knew it was something in my heart."

"I wake up thinking about it, and I fall asleep thinking about it," he continued. "Training to fight isn't only the best thing I can do in my down time here. It's the only thing I want to do."

When he's not taking care of 3/3 Marines and sailors, Mesnard shifts his focus to training. Inside the gym's dusty Hesco walls, he channels his energy into conditioning circuits, weight lifting and boxing. Here, he surrounds himself with the tools of his second trade— boxing gloves, chains, a sledgehammer, a truck tire and a makeshift medicine ball filled with sand and sealed with duct tape.

"All I need is a few pieces of equipment to use, and to break a sweat," he said. "I want to improve, so I consciously decide to train with every free minute I've got."

Mesnard calls the gym his home for nearly two hours a day. The humble surroundings are a far cry from his stateside facilities, but experience has taught him to make a little go a long way.

During his deployment to Helmand province's Nawa district last year, Mesnard served as the 'doc' for a squad of 12 Marines in 3/3's Kilo Company. For seven months, they forged an unbreakable bond, braving insurgent attacks, improvised explosive devices and the Afghan heat on daily, five to six-hour security patrols.

"Being a corpsman means a lot to me ... it's been a humbling experience," Mesnard said. "We all moaned and complained, but no matter how much things sucked or how tired we were, I loved being miserable with my guys."

While operating in Nawa during July 2010, he lost a close friend from his platoon, Sgt. Joe Wrightsman. Mesnard also aided several other friends injured by IED attacks during the deployment.

The life lesson was hard to learn, but Mesnard has translated these experiences to better himself as a corpsman and a fighter.

"In preparation for an MMA fight, I train to have muscle memory," he said. "My adrenaline's jacked and my emotions are raging, but just like in combat, I set back on my training."

Switching billets from the corpsman of an oft-patrolling infantry squad to working at the battalion headquarters has been an adjustment to the grueling routine Mesnard grew to love, but it's provided him a more structured training schedule.

"This was a sacrifice between my military career and what I want to do in the future, but I made it because I love fighting so much," he said. "I can't replace the feeling I get when I compete."

The more regular schedule has also allowed Mesnard to better regulate his diet. He tries to eat a lot of vegetables and white meats like chicken and tuna, though he called his diet "restrained" and "random" in the deployed environment.

"Being out here restricts your diet," he said. "I have a sweet tooth, especially for cake. Cake deprivation helps me stay in my routine."

Though this deployment grind is one he enjoys and knows well, Mesnard is eager for the opportunity to train and fight full-time.

When his active duty service expires in two years, Mesnard plans to advance his skills kickboxing in Thailand for three months, and then return to Nebraska to link up with old teammates and UFC fighters Jake Ellenberger and Houston Alexander. His eventual goal is to fight at the professional level, a dream built off his success as the 2011 Hawaii Triple Crown middleweight jiu-jitsu champion, a title he earned in July.

For the time being, the corpsman has found satisfaction in conditioning exercises and a swaying black punching bag, hunkered in a dusty corner of a gym 7,100 miles from home.

"I have a passion for fighting, and it's a waste of my talent if I don't keep training while I'm deployed," he said. "This definitely isn't the ideal place to train, but I've learned to make the best with what I have."

Killing Time: Channeling boredom into board games

<http://www.dvidshub.net/news/81736/killing-time-channeling-boredom-into-board-games#.TyzJRMWHe8B>

Editor's Note: This is the fourth installment in a series on U.S. Marines and Navy corpsmen from 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment, based out of Marine Corps Base Hawaii, Kaneohe Bay. After laboring through training in the California desert, they are now supporting Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Grueling days and the absence of home's amenities here make their work exhausting and their down time precious. They labor with little and appreciate the simple. This is their deployment grind.

COMBAT OUTPOST KOSHTAY, Helmand province, Afghanistan — A group of infantry Marines huddle around a Scrabble board, barely visible beneath filthy camouflage utilities and a mishmash of warming layers. Sheltered in the meager warmth of an unheated concrete room, they fill their down time by channeling boredom into a board game.

The room — a chow hall that doubles as a recreation center — is plastered with cheesy Christmas decorations. Sparsely decorated miniature Christmas trees, cheap plastic tablecloths imprinted with mistletoe and giant paper snowflakes offer a weak semblance of holiday festivity.

A veil of dust thickens the chilly air outside, limiting visibility and rendering the once-blue sky an ashen gray. In the wake of the Dec. 21 dust storm, Marines with 1st Platoon, Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment, remain indoors, unable to travel beyond the base's walls.

This down time is an exception to the short time they have between the regular rotation of guard post duty and foot patrols — precious moments to unwind by connecting with family, lifting weights, cooking and watching movies. Today, however, they're away from their home base, stuck indoors with little to do.

"We're playing games just to pass the time," said Lance Cpl. Stuart Ferreri, a 21-year-old improvised explosive device dog handler with 1st Platoon, from Northglenn, Colo. "There's always a lot of boredom in our down time, but we just make the best of it."

Ferreri surveys the letter blocks on the table in front of him, struggling to find a word to put on the board.

"Man, I've gotta go back to playing Uno ... I can't do letters," he said. "This game wasn't made for grunts."

Ferreri settles for a simple word and the turns rotate clockwise. Lance Cpl. Dustin Whitton attempts to place the word 'quagoy' on the board but his play is quickly disputed.

"That's not even a word!" several opponents protest.

"Well, it sounds like a word!" said Whitton, a 19-year-old rifleman with 1st Platoon, from Brentwood, N.Y.

He attempts to explain where he's seen the word, but the Marine seated next to him raises an eyebrow and crosses his arms. Defeated, Whitton ceases arguing.

As they play, 'hot chow' is announced. The Marines evacuate the table in a flurry of activity, grabbing dinner and inhaling ravioli, sliced pears and a carrot-pea vegetable medley.

They quickly re-convene, this time trading the Scrabble board for a deck of Uno cards. Unlike their first game, they aren't playing this one for enjoyment. It's an open opportunity for the Marines to harass each other. Each dishes out sarcasm and receives it in return.

These frank conversations, filled with guttural sounds and separated by fits of laughter, are far from malicious. It's their way of developing relationships.

"Little things like these games build camaraderie between us," Ferreri said. "But it's not so much about playing the game as it's about just being able to spend time together."

The Marines' spirited chatter fills up the cavernous room as they plunge into an argument about the game's rules. Several feverishly tap their feet to stay warm. This interject-and-retort conversation goes nowhere, so they give up, only to discover they've all forgotten whose turn it is.

The Marine in question finally resumes his turn, makes a debatable decision and is sarcastically congratulated by a friend with a tilted chin and a deep, mock announcer's voice.

This cycle continues until the Marines' attention spans wane and the game ceases. The moment of camaraderie was brief, but it's filled their time and brought them together.

"In our free time, we pull people in and keep the mood as light as possible," said Lance Cpl. Timothy Kinkade, a 22-year-old fire team leader with 1st Platoon, from Levittown, Pa. "Passing time like this keeps our minds healthy and helps us stay engaged."

He said the rigors of their seven-month deployment — separation from family, long days and few comforts — challenge each of the Marines to stay positive while enduring this grind. Both on and off duty, they depend on one another to get through the days.

"On post or patrol, it's all business," Kinkade said. "When we have down time, we have to have fun."

The Marines spend this time, however infrequent, with some of their closest friends. These relationships and the moments they grow in are the cure for the day's ailments.

"When we're together at a time like this, it's easy to joke about the miserable stuff and get through it together," Ferreri said.